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## Local

Tuesday, February 17, 2009

# Tastier, heart-healthy food now served behind bars

BY J.L. MILLER • THE NEWS JOURNAL • FEBRUARY 16, 2009

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*Supper consisted of bread and corn syrup, sometimes a stewed fruit, always well seasoned with worms, on rare occasions pea soup, and the so-called coffee.*  
— from "In Prison," by federal inmate Kate Richards O'Hare, 1923

These days, supper in a Delaware prison is likely to consist of turkey and gravy, mashed potatoes, carrots, applesauce, bread, margarine and grape drink.

**ADVERTISEMENT** Delaware's prison menu is a lot tastier than the barely edible food O'Hare endured in a federal penitentiary in the 1920s, and in the last few months it's gotten a lot more nutritious as well.

Correction Commissioner Carl Danberg has been gradually introducing a heart-healthy diet to the nearly 7,000 inmates in Delaware's four prisons, hoping it will lead to healthier inmates and lower medical costs.

White bread is gradually disappearing from the menu, and whole wheat is taking its place, according to Michael Knight, the department's food services administrator.

Sloppy joes are now made with ground turkey instead of ground beef. Salt and fat have been reduced, and fiber content has been increased.

It costs a little more, but Danberg is confident that the switch will pay off over the long haul.

"There are ways we could make this meal less expensive. Meals that are high in starch are significantly less expensive," Danberg said. "But it is not in the long-term best interest of the inmate population or the state."

*Supper consisted of bread and corn syrup, sometimes a stewed fruit, always well seasoned with worms, on rare occasions pea soup, and the so-called coffee.* -- from "In Prison," by federal inmate Kate Richards O'Hare, 1923. Anyone who's suddenly switched to a low-salt or low-fat diet knows how difficult that can be, so Danberg did not spring this on the inmates all at once.

"This diet, I think we would have seen more problems if we had tried to make an immediate switch from one diet to another. This was a phase-in over the better part of a year, and we are continuing to make changes to the menu," Danberg said.

"The concern is that we don't want to trigger an inmate disturbance. We wanted to make sure that the change was accepted by the inmate population without difficulty," he said.



The News Journal ROBERT CRAIG

Donald Ward prepares cups of tuna salad for inmates at Vaughn Correctional Center near Smyrna.  
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Danberg said he receives "very few inmate complaints about food."

On a recent day, breakfast in the four prisons consisted of tropical fruit mix, grits, a turkey sausage link, bread, jelly, milk, coffee and sugar.

Lunch was pinto bean soup, tuna salad, macaroni salad, lettuce and tomatoes, celery sticks, sliced peaches, whole wheat bread and cherry drink. That was followed by turkey for dinner.

### Higher cost defended

In these tight budgetary times, with Delaware facing a revenue shortfall estimated at \$606 million for the coming fiscal year, state agencies are under enormous pressure to reduce expenses. But Danberg defended the higher-cost diet this week in an appearance before the budget-writing Joint [Finance](#) Committee.

In 2007, it cost an average of \$2.77 per day to feed an inmate. In 2008 it rose to \$3.04, due in part to the phasing in of the new diet and also to higher commodity costs.

The state also is under pressure to improve prison medical services, and one way to do so is by decreasing demand.

Delaware has about 550 inmates who will spend the rest of their lives behind bars, and as they age, their need for medical services is likely to rise.

There also are about 3,800 inmates who will be behind bars for three years, and a healthier diet could improve their health as well.

"I hate to save the state [money](#) in the short term [by serving cheaper food] when I know that by doing so I am simply costing the state significantly more money in the long term," Danberg said.

The Rev. Christopher Bullock, senior pastor of New Canaan Baptist Church and co-founder of the Delaware Coalition for Prison Reform and Justice, said he has heard few complaints about prison food either before or after the switch.

But he hailed Danberg's move as a step in the right direction.

"Whatever the system can do to ensure a holistic approach, I'm in favor of, as long as it's healthy, it's nutritious and taking the women and the men who are incarcerated to the next level," Bullock said.

"Those kind of subtle but significant changes are positive for the system and I applaud the commissioner on doing that," he said.

Delaware is not alone in putting its prisoners on a heart-healthy diet. New York City, which serves about 42,000 meals a day, has taken an approach similar to Delaware's, though it also has eliminated sugar from all desserts except cake, which is served only on holidays.

Michigan has been serving a "healthy choice" menu since 2001, Ohio has cut starches and increased fruits and vegetables, and the federal Bureau of Prisons' national menu incorporates healthy alternatives.

But in Florida, which recently ended a failed experiment in privatizing prison food services, inmates will no longer get fresh orange juice. In a cost-cutting move, the state is serving orange juice from concentrate.

Contact J.L. Miller at 678-4271 or [jlmliller@delawareonline.com](mailto:jlmliller@delawareonline.com).

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